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## U.S. says sick cow was born before feed ban Age cited in effort to reassure public

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**Washington** -- Federal officials sought to reassure jittery consumers Monday by saying that the 6 1/2-year-old dairy cow that tested positive for mad cow disease had been born four months before the United States and Canada banned a type of cattle feed blamed for spreading the deadly ailment.

At a Washington press briefing, U.S. Agriculture Department officials said records showed the Holstein that became the nation's first mad cow case had been born in Canada in April 1997 and could have eaten feed made from bovine brain and spinal cord tissue. Canada, which still hasn't confirmed that the cow was born in its territory, reported its first case of the disease in May.

"The age of the animal is especially important in that it is a likely explanation as to how this animal would have become infected," said Dr. Ron DeHaven, the chief USDA veterinarian. "She would have been born before feed bans were implemented in North America, as the feed bans in the U.S. and Canada both went into effect in August of 1997."

He said the finding should ease fears of a possibly wider danger to the nation's beef supply. Already, the USDA has recalled 10,000 pounds of ground beef and trimmings that included meat from the infected animal. Eight states are involved in the recall, including California.

"Even with the finding of this single cow, the U.S. remains at very low risk," he added, because of the ban on feed containing ground-up parts.

Last week's disclosure that a cow in Washington state had tested positive for mad cow disease -- an ailment that can develop into brain-wasting variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans who eat brain or spinal matter from infected cows or cattle -- has been putting pressure on Washington.

The increased public concern makes it more likely that Congress will reverse course and give serious consideration to passing legislation next year that would ban the sale of meat from ill animals, as is commonly done now.

Such legislation passed one or both houses of Congress in the last two years but was dropped from final farm bills by conference committees heavily lobbied by the dairy and cattle industries. An Associated Press report said Monday that the dairy industry contributed to most members of the House Agriculture Committee who had voted heavily against the legislation. Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., got \$9,500 in donations, either from the Dairy Farmers of American PAC or the National Milk Producers Federation PAC. The panel's ranking Democrat, Rep. Charles Stenholm, D-Texas, got \$8,500.

By a voice vote, the Senate passed the ban on selling meat from ill or diseased animals. But

on July 14, the House voted it down 202-199. Among the Bay Area House delegation, only Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, voted against the bill. He comes from a family of cattle ranchers.

Wayne Pacelle, Capitol Hill lobbyist for the Humane Society of the United States, said Congress was now "poised to pass the bill that has already passed both houses.

"This whole incident with the cow in Washington state exposed the unhealthy collusion between the House Agriculture Committee and the beef and dairy industry that blindly follows the whims of those industries," he said.

The legislation, pushed by the animal rights community, would ban the marketing of all "downed" animals, those too ill or lame to walk into slaughterhouses. Animal rights advocates, who say it's cruel to drag such animals to slaughterhouses, want the animals euthanized where they are first found and their carcasses disposed of.

But farm interests say that goes much too far and have said the idea of killing ill animals before they get to slaughterhouses, where USDA inspectors can check them, would be counterproductive.

"I fear those who believe that any animal that cannot walk should be immediately destroyed wherever it is will do some real harm potentially to the future of the very food safety issues they are trying to correct," Stenholm said during the floor debate.

Opponents of the bill pointed out that USDA inspections had already increased sharply, from 5,272 head of downed cattle in fiscal 2001 to 19,990 in fiscal 2002. In all, the United States has about 105 million head of cattle.

The infected Washington cow was detected at a slaughterhouse, but only after some of its beef was ground up and shipped. The cow had recently given birth to a calf, and it was assumed she had suffered post-birth paralysis, a not uncommon occurrence.

Stenholm expects the House Agriculture Committee to hold hearings soon after it returns next month, he said Monday. While saying he still thinks the U.S. beef supply is safe to eat, he expects Congress to act next year, although the legislation won't be as far-reaching as the proposal passed by the Senate this year. A similar bill was passed by both houses in 2002 but was dropped from the final farm bill that year.

The legislation signed by President Bush this year allows Agriculture Secretary Anne Veneman to study the issue of how to handle downed animals and suggests that she draft regulations.

Stenholm, a Texas cotton farmer, suggested a bill that would hold back the meat from any downed animal until tests on its brain tissue cleared that meat for release into the food system. "We need to make absolutely certain that meat doesn't enter the food chain until we're sure," he said.

Committee members are acutely concerned with the meat supply's safety and the possibly devastating effect of a widespread mad cow outbreak on the cattle industry, he said.

Canada's beef exports were crippled by the single case found in May. In just the past week, more than 30 countries accounting for more than 90 percent of U.S. beef exports have banned U.S. beef products.

White House spokesman Trent Duffy said Monday in Crawford, Texas, that the Bush administration was considering new legislation to safeguard meat sold to consumers. "It's safe to say the administration is looking at options to further strengthen the safeguards," he said.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., blamed the White House for dragging its feet. "The administration would have done far more to protect the cattle industry had it followed a pro-consumer course," she said. "Instead, they put blinders on, and now we have to scramble to do what we should have been doing all along."

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[Page A - 1](#)